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**Daniela Grunow and Marie Evertsson (Eds.),
"Couple's Transition to Parenthood: Analysing
Gender and Work in Europe", Cheltenham (UK) -
Northampton (MA): Edward Elgar, 2016, 320 pp.**

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Book review

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In this edited volume, Daniela Grunow and Marie Evertsson aim at answering a question that has become increasingly relevant in the scholarly community and beyond: Why do traditional gender practices persist within couples living in societies that are evolving toward gender equality? In particular, why do women and men who maintained a fairly gender-equal division of paid and unpaid work before becoming parents shift into a traditional division of labour after the birth of their first child? I find this is a very salient research topic given the number of quantitative studies showing that even couples who hold gender egalitarian attitudes and behaviours fall back into a traditional division of labour when they become parents.

The volume addresses these research questions drawing on qualitative data obtained through 334 in-depth interviews with women who are in a late stage of pregnancy and their male partner in eight European countries: Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Poland and Czech Republic. With the aim of restricting the focus to subjects who value gender equality and strive towards it in their everyday life, the sample of interviewees consists of dual-earners couples. The authors define them “non-traditional resource matches”, as both members of the couple earn similar amounts or the woman is better off in the labour market than her partner. Since the number of dual-earner couples varies considerably in the countries studied in the volume and due to the sampling procedure adopted by the researchers, the interviewed couples are not representative of their respective populations and the authors do not attempt to generalize their results. However, the volume’s focus on these highly-selected couples is still valuable, as it provides a detailed snapshot of the lives, plans, aspirations, negotiations and fears of subjects who are pioneers in the making of a more gender-equal society. In particular, the interviews are centred on the expected changes envisioned by the couples and on their plans about how to organize their lives after the birth of their child. By doing so, the authors strive to go beyond the descriptive level and provide explanations for the (planned) behaviour of the parents-to-be by placing their arguments within the context of each country-specific *gender culture* and *the available family policies*. The volume is structured in six parts, with the first three chapters providing the conceptual framework, the comparative overview and the methodology, respectively. The chapters in the central parts of the volume present the results for each country, whereas the conclusions are discussed in part six.

In the conceptual framework, the authors argue that institutions act as points of reference for parents-to-be in European societies and that couples draw upon dominant constructions of motherhood and fatherhood in deciding how to plan their future life as parents. However, parental ideals regarding what is the best care option for the child, for example, or the timing of the mothers’ return to work, might not necessarily be

supported by national family policies. Moreover, parents might find themselves deviating from the dominant gender culture. The authors claim that these *gaps* between individual ideals, dominant gender culture and national policies engender a sense of uncertainty about how the interviewed subjects should organize their deeply changed lives after the transition to parenthood. In particular, the authors underline the importance of the *congruence* between the dominant gender culture and national family policies to minimize uncertainty among parents-to-be.

The second chapter offers a useful map for readers who are unfamiliar with the eight analysed countries by illustrating contextual differences regarding female labour force participation, availability and affordability of childcare, generosity of parental leave schemes, employment protection legislation, levels of unemployment and overall gender equality. These characteristics are crucial as they represent the structure of opportunities and constraints under which parents-to-be plan and decide how to organize the care for their child and their work schedule. Therefore, this in-depth discussion of the national contexts is a necessary and welcome part of the volume.

Chapter three illustrates the methodology. Overall, 334 interviews were carried out between 2004 and 2012, as the period of fieldwork varies between countries. Differences in the timing of fieldwork raise some issues about cross-national comparability, especially considering that the 2008-2009 financial and economic crisis occurred during that time span. Moreover, as acknowledged by the authors, the older data might be less engaging for the readers interested in the policy implications of the research.

The number of interviewed couples varies across countries, ranging from 12 in Poland to 50 in Spain. This disparity in the number of interviews is rather surprising and suggests that the robustness of the results varies notably across samples. The mothers- and fathers-to-be were recruited in different ways, but the most common were prenatal classes, gynaecologists' offices, through snowball sampling and, in some cases, on line through social media such as Facebook and specialized websites. In all countries, the parents were interviewed separately and in most cases in their homes. While the countries are selected following a most different systems design, the couples are chosen to be as homogenous as possible to maximise comparability. Therefore, only couples who were at the end of their first pregnancy, with high and similar levels of education, similar earnings and labour market attachment are selected. However, some exceptions were made to this sampling criterion. In Spain, for example, where it was problematic to find dual-earner expecting couples due to the economic crisis occurring during the years of the study and sky-high levels of unemployment, couples with a non-employed partner were also selected. The relatively strict sampling criteria proved problematic also in Germany.

The data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Common guidelines for the interviews were derived from a German study conducted by one of the authors that served as blueprint and was used for all countries except Switzerland and The Netherland, for which data were retrieved and harmonized from previous studies. The interview guidelines were developed to touch upon a set of topics including employment and career development, household formation and division of domestic tasks, current situation during the pregnancy as well as plans and hopes for the future after the birth. Overall, the methodological chapter provides abundance of detail about how

the research was carried out and what strategies were adopted to secure comparability in the instrument, data collection and analyses.

In chapters four to twelve, the results from the single country studies are presented. Consistently throughout the chapters, the authors briefly summarize the most salient country characteristics and contextualize the interviews before moving to an in-depth discussion of the results. Excerpts of interviews are reported in both English and the original language. For each country, a common set of topics is discussed, with most of the attention centred on the plans that the parents-to-be have for the months (and in some cases years) following the birth of the child and on their thoughts and reasoning about *why* they developed those plans. The interviews also focus on *how* such plans were devised in terms of the negotiations that took place between partners, but also between the parents and their wider network, including their close family and friends, peers, co-workers and their employers. A great deal of attention is placed on the introspective accounts provided by the parents-to-be, who anticipate not just organizational and practical changes in their daily lives, but also profound changes to their identities with the transition to parenthood. In general, parental accounts are linked to the contextual structure of constraints and opportunities, and therefore mothers- and fathers-to-be in the interviews go back and forth between their aspirations – regarding childcare, paid work and division of unpaid work between partners – and what they will do given the national circumstances. For example, in many countries a common desire among future mothers (supported by the fathers) was to exclusively breastfeed the child for the six-months period recommended by the World Health Organization. Similarly, most parents-to-be expressed a preference not to enrol their child in formal care too early (i.e. younger than a year of age) or not have the child in care for more than a few days a week. However, most national maternity and parental leave schemes require parents to return to work early to avoid significant income losses and therefore are not fit to accommodate the needs of breastfed children nor the desire of parents to avoid early childcare. Thus, most parents-to-be in the volume appear stuck between the desire to do what is “best for the child” and the actual opportunities that are available to them.

Against this background, gender inequalities in the care of the new-born emerge in nearly all countries. Except for Sweden, which unsurprisingly appears as the most gender egalitarian in terms of division of paid and unpaid labour at home, parents-to-be seem quite content with embracing traditional gender roles when approaching parenthood. Much of the parental reasoning behind this accepted transition relies on the notion that women and men are biologically different. These innate and unchangeable traits were intrinsically link with the idea of the “natural” motherhood role. The interviewees in most countries called upon pregnancy and breastfeeding as watersheds between the maternal and paternal role that made mothers naturally and instinctively *better* at taking care of a very young child. Thus, fathers who are by default deprived of these skills pick up a different set of responsibilities and endorse the traditional breadwinning role. Interestingly though, this rational set up was applied beyond the early months of the child’s life and well into the first year, therefore when maternal care is no longer biologically essential. Moreover, this occurred even in cases when economic calculus would suggest that the father should be the main carer because he was either unemployed or earning a lower wage than the mother. With rare exceptions, the fathers-to-be in the

volume maintain a strong work orientation and start fatherhood with an “imperative to earn” whereas the mothers-to-be are more likely enter the process “with an imperative to care” [p. 285].

Overall, the volume offers significant and valuable insights into the daily lives of soon-to-be parents in European countries. Particularly appreciable is the effort to provide a contextual background to some of the least known countries, such as the Eastern European ones. However, some aspects of the research design and the structure of the volume leave the reader with a sense of unfulfillment. On the one hand, the number of interviewed couples is rather low and changes notably from one country to another. Such variability inevitably begs the question of whether the results would have changed if other subjects had been selected. Considering that couples were chosen within relatively small areas and possibly through networks, self-selection in groups with shared characteristics cannot be excluded and it could be the case that the interviewed couples are even less representative than suggested by the authors. Thus, a wider pool of interviewees would have rendered their results more robust. On the other hand, the reader is left with an unsatisfying “to be continued” feeling, given that the book does not include follow-up interviews with the parents-to-be. A further aspect that is not addressed in the interviews but could be developed in further research regards the long-term effects of parenthood on the couples’ lives. In other words, the focus of the volume is restricted to the first period after the transition to parenthood but not much reflection is provided about whether parental care and the division of paid work might become more gender-equal as the child grows. Some hints to this emerge in the fathers’ interviews, who often mention being more involved with their children when they become older, but a deeper investigation in this respect could yield interesting results, especially in cross-national perspective. In other words, the shift toward a traditional division of paid labour and care is envisioned to be temporary by some parents-to-be, but is this the case, or are the changes likely to become permanent?

To conclude, *Couple’s Transitions to Parenthood* is a valuable contribution to the sociological literature on cross-national differences in gender inequalities in the life course as it provides relevant qualitative empirical evidence backing up and expanding on findings from previous quantitative studies. Moreover, by re-stating the strong link between women and men’s behaviours and national family policies, the book contributes to the international debate by invoking more comprehensive and better compensated maternity, paternity and parental leave schemes, and greater child-care availability. Indeed, family policies could be the key to allow mothers and fathers to align their plans and behaviours with their aspired level of gender equality.

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