

Review: Couples' Transitions to Parenthood: Analysing Gender and Work in Europe - Grunow and Evertsson

<http://www.e-elgar.com/shop/couples-transitions-to-parenthood>

This book – an edited volume – presents findings from a range of linked research studies investigating couples transitions to parenthood in a variety of European settings (including Sweden, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Poland and the Czech Republic).

Whilst understanding parenting as a deeply 'ethical act' (in the sense of reproducing social values), the volume aims to explore issues faced by couples as they become parents, as they relate to gender culture, family policy and socio-economic context. Theoretically and methodologically, a couple focus is used to emphasize the fact that individual plans and experiences are inevitably tied to that of the partner. Furthermore, and inherent to the international scope of the project, gender ideologies are understood to operate at both macro and micro-levels, giving the volume a sophisticated and comprehensive theoretical framework.

This is a particularly interesting time to be studying the transition to parenthood in European settings. As the introduction outlines, recent years have been characterised by, on the one hand, an 'intensification' of cultural ideas about parenting, which reiterates the importance of parent-child contact, and on the other, a commitment to gender equality as childcare responsibilities relate to men and women's career prospects and 'work-life-balance'. Systems of shared parental leave, increasingly considered the 'gold standard' of policy making are promoted with the idea that this enables either or both parents to take extended periods of time away from work, with the 'ideal' couple being the dual earner/dual carer couple.

However, evidence from across a range of settings (presented in the volume, as well as elsewhere) has pointed out that despite being committed to egalitarian ideals before having children, the majority of couples revert to traditional gendered practices once they arrive (even, as the volume shows, planning to do this in advance). The driving question, or paradox, that the volume is trying to understand is *why* that might be.

Clearly, state structures and wider socio-economic factors will affect both cultural ideas about 'good parenting' (or 'gender equality') as well as have implications for the feasibility of measures to change either, so this collection is a welcome and valuable contribution in providing rich and in-depth data from such a range of settings. Where this first volume, on the whole, presents findings from interviews with couples during pregnancy, a planned follow up volume will examine further their accounting for their experiences after the children have been born, which will elucidate further this fascinating question.

In so far as conclusions can be reached at this stage, then, the authors point out that whilst they play a part in decision making around the division of childcare and work, neither rational (financial) nor physiological reasons can

explain the persistence of the paradox alone. Instead, the evidence points to the active contemplation of couples in the move towards a more traditional model of the division of labour. This is linked closely to their own identity-work, in ways that were particularly profound for women. For example, whilst respondents talked about 'naturally becoming' a mother, there was a sense that fatherhood was something that needed to be actively constructed, and was not something which affected men's career plans (on the whole).

Whilst offering some fascinating, empirically supported insights, it would be interesting to hear more from the authors about their perspective on whether policy around parental leave and childcare is truly a solution to 'gender equality'. In particular, whether this risks rolling out an intensive model of childcare to men, which only places more pressure on *couples* rather than looking for wider social solutions to the care/work 'problem'. Furthermore, some comment on to what extent states can – or should – intervene in intimate relations in the course of trying to create social change might also be warranted, particularly as some of their evidence seems to imply that couples do not actually *want* the 'ideal' dual earner/dual carer set up, so beloved of policy makers. The next volume is awaited with eager anticipation.

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