

Book Review

Understanding families over time

Janet Holland and Rosalind Edwards (Eds.) London: Palgrave Macmillan 2014; 224 pp ISBN 978 1 1372 8507 2: £ 65.00 (hbk)

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The family is a major domain in which most individuals live out their lives. This domain has been subject to some significant historical changes from the preindustrial era, to the industrial revolution, to the current postindustrial era. These have included changes in the division of labour so that income and childcare are no longer the sole responsibility of fathers and mothers respectively, the traditional nuclear family is being challenged by a host of other configurations, and there has been an increase in the blurring boundaries between family, work and community (Voydanoff, 2007). Developments such as these, impact on family relationships and identities. Understanding these in the contemporary postindustrial era are the focus of Janet Holland and Rosalind Edwards' edited collection of essays from sociology, social psychology, social policy, oral history, gerontology, health studies and cultural studies scholars working within the Timescapes' programme; a network of researchers from five UK universities (Cardiff, Edinburgh, Leeds, London South Bank and the Open University). The various scholars in this book undertake qualitative longitudinal research to explore social change through time from the perspective of those who experience it, making this one of the book's main strengths. I was also impressed by the variety of interesting and important topics investigated 'siblings and friends, lateral relationships in childhood and youth; the unfolding lives of young people; the dynamics of motherhood; masculinities, identities, men as fathers; work-life balance in families with young children; grandparents and social exclusion; and the experiences of the oldest generation'(p.3).

The book consists of eleven chapters and is divided into three sections. Rosalind

Edwards, Susie Weller and Sarah Baker begin the first section 'Relationships and Life Chances of Children and Young Adults', with a chapter rejecting political rhetoric which asserts generation is a key societal division in you people's lives arguing instead, inter and intra-generational relationships are complex and multilayered, and that generation is a much more fluid concept. Sheena McGrellis and Janet Holland's chapter on the other hand examines the impact of challenging social, political and historical influences on young people's lives and in particular the gaps and deficiencies in policies and the effect of sectarianism.

Part Two explores 'Parenting and Family Life'. Bren Neale and Carmen Lau Clayton's begin by examining young fathers' perspectives on parents and grandparents becoming increasingly involved in children care duties. Karen Henwood, Fiona Shirani and Carrie Coltart highlight how traditional and modern masculinities influence men's experiences of becoming and being fathers. Rachel Thomson's chapter demonstrates how motherhood impacts on the kinds of workers women are as well as the impacts of motherhood on employers. Rachel also shows how work impacts on women's parenting. Jeni Harden, Alice MacLean, Kathryn Backett-Milburn, Sarah Cunningham-Burley and Lynn Jamieson's look at the tensions between wanting to be a 'good' parent and also having to juggle other aspects of one's life. The last essay in this section by Sara Irwin and Mandy Winterton illustrates through a literature review the gendered domestic division of labour.

Nick Emmel and Kathryn Hughes begin the concluding section 'Older Lives and Times' examines the effects of 'time' on family decisions such as when to begin parenting but also how those decisions might produce gaps in social policy such as the absence of appropriate support for grandparents with childcare duties. The final essay, before the editors draw conclusions and identify emerging themes, is Joanna Bornat and Rosalind Edwards chapter on the intergenerational relationships between grandparents and grandchildren

showing how events and changes in family life might impinge grandparents status, their relationships and on their notions of grand parenting.

As a gender scholar I was particularly impressed with Karen Henwood, Fiona Shirani and Carrie Coltart which highlighted the impact of, and on masculinities. The authors correctly point out that masculinity is not what it used to be. Today's men are less limited than previous generations and do things that their fathers would have balked at, including playing a more active role in raising their children. However, being less limited than their fathers doesn't mean modern men are unconstrained. Whilst most of their interviewees were committed to egalitarian parenting they were still felt constrained by social barriers to their paternal 'roles' such as feeling marginalised during their partner's pregnancy and at whilst they were breastfeeding. Interviewees also expressed being responsible for providing finance planning even though spouses' income level was similar. Since the field of men and masculinity is still relatively underdeveloped I think this chapter in particular makes an important contribution to this field.

Given the book focuses on people's familial experiences and how these are affected by other domains of life such as work and community, I was surprised the book didn't really engage with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The essays in this book can be comfortably located within Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisation of the family, work and community as a microsystems consisting of networks of face-to-face relationships. These microsystems are influenced the interlinks between these different systems – mesosystems (e.g. Rachel Thomson's chapter), the influences of other environments on one's own environment - exosystems (e.g. Karen Henwood, Fiona Shirani and Carrie Coltart's chapter) and the impacts of the overarching pattern of culture an subculture in which these systems are nested - macrosystem (e.g. Rosalind Edwards, Susie Weller and Sarah Baker's chapter). Admittedly, the editors do locate their Timescapes research within a qualitative longitudinal

research framework but I feel an engagement with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) would have provided the reader with a more nuanced understanding of the research presented in the book.

Despite this reservation I am well aware that mapping, contextualizing and illustrating inter and intra-generational familial changes over time is a difficult undertaking, and even more so, if the intended audience is interdisciplinary and specialist. The various scholarly contributions in this collection are written in a succinct, clear and accessible style which is suitable for newcomers to the subject. The outcome is a major accomplishment, making this book indispensable as both a learning and a teaching resource.

References

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. *Annals of Child Development*, 6: 187-249.

Voydanoff, P. (2007). *Work, Family, and Community: Exploring Interconnections*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.: New Jersey