

CHILDBEARING AND THE
CHANGING NATURE OF
PARENTHOOD: THE CONTEXTS,
ACTORS, AND EXPERIENCES OF
HAVING CHILDREN

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

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Childbearing and the Changing Nature of Parenthood: The Contexts, Actors, and Experiences of Having Children

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FOREWORD

Rú yǐng suí xíng

As the shadow follows the body, the English translation of the Chinese idiom chosen as the motto for this Foreword, is metaphorical for this volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* in many ways. Since the beginning of this editorial project, we envisaged the transitions into parenthood as something we knew was colorful, vivid, and dynamic, deeply intertwined in nature and culture, yet scientifically wrapped in many shadows. Some months ago, when we had to choose the title for the volume, the changing nature of parenting appeared to us as the most appropriate formulation to account for such an idea. Today, we can say that we have not deceived ourselves. In gathering and reading the manuscripts received through an international call, we dived into much differentiated, and sometimes contrasting, realities. Despite this, in all of them, we perceived the still-ever-profound changing nature of parenting and the progressive certainty of the importance of using the plural in the title. There is no transition but transitions into parenthood.

The birth of a child represents both the end of one experience, wherein parents have been preparing for the arrival of the child, and also the beginning of yet another experience, involving the rearing of the child. Entry into parenthood represents a fundamental shift in family structure and family dynamics, which practices and senses the recent changes in the family come into question. Transitions into parenthood continue to be a key issue in family research, yet incorporating the main themes and debates that today are placed to the contemporary family: the rising individualism and the (new) place of the child within the family and society, technological advances regarding ICTs, biomedicalization and reproductive technologies, the power and influence of social media into everyday life, the pressure exerted by the market economy and consumption society, the (new) role of the man in the family dynamics, the pluralization of family structures and non-traditional relations, as well as possibilities and constraints raised by issues regarding migration and transnational families.

From all this, it turns out that parenting is not just a matter that concerns only parents and children. It never was. As a cutting-edge topic in family research around the globe, parenting involves a wide range of actors, people from the nuclear and extended family, non-family members, peers, health and education professionals, institutions such as school, medical clinics and hospitals, and community-based organizations aiming to provide support and help. It crosses the physical space between states and continents, and relies upon different motivations, expectations, and values, some deeply rooted, others new and emerging. Furthermore, the decision to have a child has substantial bearing upon the larger

society, particularly in regard to broad population and policy issues. The two components of childbearing and childrearing vary considerably across cultures, over space and time, and each of these continues to change.

This multidisciplinary volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* aims to contribute to our understanding of the varied and complex changing nature of becoming a parent. It brings together research projects from contributors around the globe, along with research designs which vary quite substantially from one another. The theoretical underpinnings are diverse and rooted in different disciplines. Within a quantitative, qualitative, mixed or multi method's framework, various methodologies for data collection and analysis were employed. Literature reviews, interviews, questionnaires, Likert scales or ethnography; statistical, content, biographical and interpretative phenomenological analysis was performed. Pilot, exploratory, descriptive or longitudinal studies used as the unit of analysis either survey datasets, documents or individuals, focusing in their experience *a solo*, as a couple or living in a three-generation family. Pluralization is not just in the title of what we intended to study. Ultimately, it lies in the result as this volume deconstructs monolithic views over transitions into parenthood by hearing the many voices and actions involved, whether by gender, race, education and economic status, family form, life cycle stage and phase in the parental trajectory or career.

This volume explores childbearing, its contexts, actors and experiences. In doing so, it explores issues regarding assisted reproduction, contraception, birth-preparation classes, the midwives' role and experiences toward medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth. In the chapter titled "Putting Gender on Ice: Preserving Motherhood in Media Coverage of Elective Egg and Sperm Freezing," Ashlyn M. Jaeger uses elective egg and sperm freezing as a case to compare representations of men and women as agents of biological reproduction. Aiming particularly to understand how gender and risk are co-produced in the context of new reproductive technologies, and departing from a content analysis of internationally renowned newspaper articles about egg and sperm freezing, Ashlyn interestingly traces how fertility risks facing men and women are differently portrayed in the media. Concerning freezing both egg and sperm, the research shows how the gendered construction of infertility risk reinforces normative expectations around childrearing and perpetuates gender inequity in parenting norms.

Transition into motherhood is presented as a major life-course event for most women, not infrequently fraught with difficulties, due to the uncertainty and instability which accompany it. Samantha Reveley departs from this idea for the chapter titled "Becoming Mum: Exploring the Emergence and Formulation of a Mother's Identity during the Transition into Motherhood." Theoretically, she uses assemblage theory assumptions and in the empirical work she draws on biographical narrative interviews with White British, heterosexual mothers from the North East of England, each at different stages in motherhood. The interviews focused on inducing uninterrupted narratives detailing the lived experiences of these women as they transitioned into and across motherhood. By the end, transitioning into motherhood proved to be a multifaceted process that comprised of numerous stages where a woman's identity and sense of self would become

destabilized and reformulated as a result of changes in her everyday lived experiences and routines.

In “Contextual Influences on Contraception Use Among Poor Women in Pakistan,” Hassan Raza, Brad van Eeden-Moorefield, Soyoung Lee, and Lisa Lieberman use bioecological theory and logistic regression over cross-sectional datasets taken from the Pakistan Demographic and Health Surveys to examine the effects of different contextual factors such as husbands’ desire for children, visit by a family planning worker, media messages and province level on women’s use of contraception in Pakistan. The results discuss significant predictors of women’s use of contraception across time, raising important issues about fewer studied topics, such as the (non)coincidence among partners of the desire for having (more) children.

Marion Müller, Nicole Zillien, and Julia Gerstewitz coauthor the chapter “Doing Becoming a Mother: The Gendering of Parenthood in Birth-preparation Classes in Germany.” While advocating that German birth-preparation classes have received little attention in sociological research thus far, the authors present results from a current study examining the role of birth-preparation classes in the extensive gendering during the transition into parenthood, in Germany. Methodologically, ethnography of birth-preparation classes was combined with a content analysis of text material made available by professional associations of midwives. By focusing on female corporeality in birth preparation courses, the authors draw the attention on how birth-preparation classes introduce a gendered distribution of labor as early as in the antenatal phase and, thereby, function as institutions promoting a process of re-gendering and re-traditionalization of child care and labor, and legitimize these differences through naturalization.

“Midwives in Ontario Hospitals: The Mainstreaming of ‘Alternative’ Childbearing,” by Melodie Cardin, makes use of semi-structured interviews with midwives throughout the province to interrogate the progressive integration of Ontario midwives into the hospital system. The author uses the lens of Michel Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge to identify the ways in which medicalized norms have been privileged in Ontario birth care, and to demonstrate how pregnant women and midwives have struggled against the power/knowledge of hospital environments. This chapter offers an “alternative” to medicalized childbirth, which recognizes that a birth caregiver’s role is both the physical care of mothers and babies, and broad guidance for families during a liminal experience.

In “The Medicalization of Pregnancy and Childbirth in Contemporary Turkey: The Effect of Risk Discourses for Turkish Women’s Experiences,” Zehra Zeynep Sadıkoğlu aims to describe how Turkish mothers experience the medicalization of pregnancy and birth within the contemporary social and cultural structure. The study was designed as a phenomenological research, and highly educated mothers in the middle and upper-income groups living in cities with small children were interviewed about their expectations and experiences about pregnancy and childbirth. Specifically, the paper focuses on expert knowledge and risk discourses. Zehra cannot fail to notice the power of such discourses,

as even in cases when the participants were opposed to the technological and medicalized conceptualization of pregnancy and childbirth, and objected to some aspects, the hierarchical superiority of the doctor and the fact that the expert knowledge was socially approved, did not allow the participants to challenge the validity of it, and they behave cooperative.

Christina Scott, Siri Wilder, and Justine Bennett write together the chapter “Going It Alone: A Multigenerational Investigation of Women’s Perceptions of Single Mothers by Choice Versus Circumstance.” The study explores attitudes toward single mothers and personal willingness to become single parents in the future. Interrogating choice versus circumstance, the paper discusses the (still) prevalence of negative stereotypes of single parents despite the rising number of unmarried and/or divorced parents. Using Likert’s scales and open-ended questions, the authors explore West Coast American female respondents’ attitudes toward fictitious single mothers, advantages/challenges faced by each mother and willingness to become a single mother by choice. Entering into the millennials’ mind and attitudes, comparing and contrasting it with adults, is quite interesting as it simultaneously allows us to find old persistence and new trends regarding (un)willingness and (dis)advantages of being/becoming single mothers either by choice or circumstance.

In “Building a Family within a Non-Heterosexual Couple: Struggles, Fears, Representations and Practices,” Filomena Santos and Rita Dias aim to deepen the knowledge of the family dynamics of non-heterosexual people, specifically as far as the process of transition into parenting is concerned. The chapter interrogates what it means to the men, and women interviewed, to be a father and to be a mother in a same-sex couple and how they project themselves as fathers and mothers. Based on in-depth interviews with Portuguese young adults’ women and men who have a same-sex relationship and a project of parenting in mind, the authors discuss issues related to the challenge of heteronormativity, equality within the couple, projects and gender representations of parenthood.

Sheresa Boone Blanchard and Tacy Rae LeBaron explore implications for how race might impact the variability across families in their study, “A Qualitative Inquiry: Reflections on Pregnancy, Birth, and Transition to Parenthood Experiences of African-American Couples with a Toddler Son.” The authors interviewed African American, heterosexual couples with a toddler son in a southeastern US county about their beliefs, practices and challenges in their lives right before and during the pregnancy, delivery and right after the birth of their son. The qualitative thematic analysis showed that most parents shared similar experiences of planning the pregnancy, breastfeeding from birth and both being involved in care giving. However, variability in preparation, emotions and adjustment existed during this period. Although differential pregnancy outcomes could be race-related (i.e. gestational period length and preterm delivery), other aspects of this universal experience were similar to the average couple in the US.

With the research included herein, this volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* resulted in an extraordinarily rich collection. Being informed for such different disciplines, theoretical frameworks and research designs, it offers a multitude of studies on the multiple and multiplex dimensions of the transitions

of parenthood both across space, time, and culture. Moreover, bringing together contributions from PhD students, early-career and established researchers, either in single or co-authorship, this volume also provides the attentive reader an interesting insight behind the scenes of the research, showing how the distinctive hands who write and the distinct stages in which writing occurs shape the research' scope and depth.

For this wonderful outcome, we are deeply grateful to the authors who provided important contributions to the volume, the members of the editorial board, the external reviewers and the magnificent staff at Emerald Publishing, for their outstanding assistance in bringing this book to print. Our task was greatly facilitated by the generosity of their collaboration and dedication to this project.

As we finish writing the foreword, we firmly believe that the most interesting contribution of this volume is yet to come. Today, these chapters offer an insightful look into transitions into parenthood, around the globe. Tomorrow, they can be a fruitful tool into new and different ways of studying it. Definitely, the great benefit of this volume is not for the contributors, nor for editors, but for all the potential readers, who certainly will find here many inspiring motives to pursue further research with the aim of bringing scientific informed light into contemporary family's shadow fields.

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