

Transitions

INTERVIEW STUDY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

for the EU Framework 5 study
'Gender, Parenthood and the
Changing European
Workplace'

Executive Summary of Research Report #8
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Interview Study Executive Summary

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Transitions is a qualitative cross-national research project which aims to examine how young European adults negotiate motherhood and fatherhood and work-family boundaries in the context of labour market and workplace change, different national welfare state regimes and family and employer supports. The project is examining individual and household strategies and their consequences for well-being at the individual, family and organisational levels. This is studied in the context of parallel organisational contexts and macro levels of public support in the 8 participating countries: France, Portugal, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, the UK, Bulgaria and Slovenia.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report covers the interview phase of the *Transitions* study. This was the third phase of the project, which followed the literature review and context mapping phase, and the organisational case studies. This third phase consisted of a series of biographical interviews conducted with parents who were employees of public sector and private sector organisations in seven countries. A social services department was studied in the UK, Norway, Sweden, Portugal and Bulgaria. Case studies in the private sector were studied in financial services in most cases and include the UK, Norway, The Netherlands, Portugal, Bulgaria and Slovenia (see das Dores Guerreiro et al 2004).

A primary objective of the interview study was to gain an understanding of motherhood and fatherhood from a gendered perspective. This involved examining the *transition to parenthood* of both men and women. We approached this by adopting a life course perspective combined with a biographical approach. The latter involves eliciting retrospective accounts from interviewees of the life course decision to have a child and the period following the child's birth (parents with children under twelve years were included).

In this report we have tried to address the research issues identified in the project proposal for this phase of the study.

The objectives of the Interview Study were:

- To further the understanding of motherhood and fatherhood from a gendered life course perspective together with an examination of the transition to parenthood (the latter to be examined retrospectively and for those on parental leave concurrently)
- To examine the gendered experiences of combining waged work and children, and parents' work-family strategies, for example the extent to which employees make the boundaries between work and family life permeable or keep the two spheres separate
- To identify the strategies parents adopt and the resources they draw upon (family, friends, workplace and public policy, especially parental leave) in the context of different organisational contexts and practices, and in relation to employee contractual status (including temporary workers) and different national welfare regimes
- To examine the relationship between different work-family strategies and well-being
- To explore in gendered terms parents' current perspectives with their professed expectations on combining parenthood and waged work

Transitions is an unusual project in that it brings a mixed methods approach that highlights qualitative methods to the study of parents' lives lived in seven different European countries. In this report we have created an analytic framework in which the many layers of context in which interviewees' lives are embedded are made manifest.

Methodology and selection of cases

There are two main aspects to the rationale for our design and methodology. The first aspect is the logic of case study design: to the overall cross-national, comparative design we have applied a *case study logic*. We justify in particular the selection of cases – of countries, organisations and parents – as the study proceeded, both in the fieldwork phase but also in the analysis of the material and the writing of the report. Through this approach we hope that different layers of context are made explicit at every step of the study. We also set out how the overall design addresses issues of representativeness in comparative research. The second aspect of the overall methodology of this phase is the application of a life course perspective to a biographical interview approach. This is discussed at length in Chapter 3, including the creation of life lines for each interviewee. The latter was particularly helpful when examining the interviewees' lives across gender, social class and national context.

Most of the mothers and fathers we interviewed belong to the birth cohorts born between 1965 and 1975 (Chapters 2 and 3). Thus they are the children of the 'baby boomers' born just after the end of World War II, and in most countries for this reason they form a rather large cohort, compared with later birth cohorts. The interviewees were born into societies very different from the ones in which they live their adult lives and their parents lived theirs.

The transition to parenthood in different European regions

The conditions under which the transition to parenthood took place vary. The factors brought to bear in the analysis include the national economic and political contexts, the welfare regimes of the countries concerned, the individual's life course phase, the specific formal and informal resources available to individuals namely education, employment, family relationships and workplace conditions. In some national contexts some conditions are more important than others, for instance in Bulgaria and Portugal the wider family is an important resource for new parents. In Northern Europe the wider family is reported to be less significant, a fact we attribute to a discourse of independence and autonomy in these countries and the existence of a generous welfare state, particularly in the Scandinavian countries.

In this report we analyse the transition to parenthood in the three different regions of Europe: Northern Europe, Southern Europe and South Eastern Europe. We focus on the shape of the life course – its linearity and lack of linearity and discuss this in relation to patterns of transitions and phases in the life course. We also analyse the timing of motherhood and fatherhood in the life course across these contexts, and how the timing of the transition varies between men and women from different social classes across the countries. The timing of parenthood is discussed with reference to other life course phases and transitions such as education, entry into employment and partnering.

We also note considerable class differences across countries in the timing of the transition to parenthood. The lower the level of education the earlier in life the transition is likely to happen. For most well-educated interviewees the transition happened after the completion of education, entry into the labour market and gaining a foothold in the housing market. Young parents from Eastern Europe for instance, even the fairly well-off, have a harder time getting into the housing market than in many other countries. In some cases they have to live with parents or in-laws for a period of time as housing is scarce in some areas and not affordable even for young parents with permanent job contracts. In the UK, especially in London where the social services study was done, ethnicity and migration are important factors that shape parents' experiences.

The decision to become a parent is related to the type of life parents experience at this transition point. Where for many it appears that the transition happened at a time when it was 'right', when everything was in place for parenthood to happen without there having been a long period of planning ahead, for others the decision was the result of careful planning. The latter is likely to be associated with affluent young families where having children also means changing their life style in important ways. The report emphasises how the transition to parenthood, as indeed other life course transitions, must be analysed and understood in the different layers of context in which individual lives are embedded.

The experience of being a working parent in the present

We selected countries from the three regions of Europe, to compare how particular mothers and fathers experience parenthood. In a discussion of the experiences of being a working mother, we focus on Portugal, Sweden, Bulgaria, and the UK. Here, we selected cases of women with lower education and jobs in the lower echelons of the job hierarchy of their public sector workplaces. The justification is that a focus on the less well-off highlights aspects of context that make parenthood feasible for the majority of parents of each country, not only their more advantaged members. Such parents often draw upon informal sources of support, whereas the better-off can afford to pay their way. An analysis of the experiences of those employed in low-status public sector jobs also provides a baseline for assessing how societies cater for the well-being of those providing important public services.

Our analysis demonstrates how new parents' contentment, or lack of contentment, depends not only upon the resources available to them, but also on the resources available to those with whom they compare themselves. We show how mothers from Portugal and Bulgaria emerge as relatively content compared with their more fortunate peers in Sweden and the UK. We also compare the contributions of advantaged father, men who in Northern European societies are expected to pull their weight in childcare and the home. These men (from three contrasting countries – Norway, The Netherlands and Slovenia) are at the other end of the socio-economic spectrum, working in higher status jobs in the private sector. The Slovenian father discussed in-depth emerges as doing the least childcare and is the most content. In a society in which material expectations have been relatively low with the sharp transition from a communist to a market economy, having a job, a car, a wife, children and a house gave this father a feeling of considerable achievement - they were enough. In contrast to the Norwegian father (and the Dutch father both also discussed), gender equality had yet to touch the Slovenian father, while his children's grandparents provided the major childcare support and let him off the hook.

How families adapt to combining work and family is important for their feelings of well-being (see Cernigoj Sadar & Kersnik, forthcoming). However, the options young parents have to choose from where strategies are concerned, are related to the different layers of context within which they live their lives.

Supports and constraints for new parents

We approach the topic of support and constraints by exploring the range of formal and informal resources available to parents and how these intersect. The focus is on highlighting the various aspects of national contexts. Hence the cases in the chapter dealing with this are the particular countries, and analysis centres on constructing typologies. The most significant support for mothers and fathers are childcare support and working hours. The chapter focuses on childcare as a private, a family, or a public concern, and working hours as full-time or part-time. Across Europe most fathers work full-time, so that part-time work, where it exists, is largely perceived as an option for mothers, often with negative implications for women's occupational careers if they do take up part-time working. There is some evidence from our interviews, which echoes conclusions from other studies, that part-time employees feel their commitment to work is questioned. Part-time work can therefore be seen simultaneously as a resource for the families but a career risk for women employees.

In the Netherlands, which has the highest percentage of women in part-time work, the idea of childcare as a public concern is quite foreign. In Sweden the resource of working part-time work is augmented by high quality, affordable public childcare provided in children's own communities, whereas in Portugal both mothers and fathers work full-time and there is little in the way of access to formal and affordable childcare. Support from the wider family becomes crucial for young families in this situation.

Parenthood plays out differently in different contexts. But whatever the context, the gender differences remain.

Implications for policy

By way of conclusion we suggest a few points that, on the basis of our research, are important for policies.

1. The transition to parenthood and experiences of and strategies for managing paid work and family need to be analysed and understood in the different layers of context in which individual lives are embedded.
2. A focus on multiple layers of context also points to the need for a multi-layered approach to policy-making. Changes in legislation alone are of limited value without shifts in organisational values and practices, family and community practices.
3. A frequently recurring theme across the countries is the ways in which gender shapes parenthood and makes motherhood different from fatherhood both in everyday family life and in workplaces. The transition to parenthood appears to be a critical 'tipping point' on the road to gender equality.
4. There is a dilemma that policies that meet parents' currently articulated needs – for example part-time work for mothers, also reproduce gender inequalities (unless there is change in workplace values and practices especially the gendered construction of commitment).
5. Policies that address gender issues, such as the father's quota in parental leave, may create tensions in families. Such couple tensions may be necessary for progress to occur. On the other hand, help from extended family may act as a solution to such conflicts but absolve fathers from making more significant contributions, thus perpetuating gendered family practices.

6. Expectations for managing work-family life may be more easily met in less affluent societies especially where gender equality ideas are not yet widely established. Low expectations may more easily generate well-being, in contrast to the higher expectations of parents living in societies with higher standards of gender equality and greater affluence. But again, raising expectations and unsettling people may be necessary for change.
7. Our study points to the importance of identifying the most vulnerable parents. Policies that would help such parents include affordable, good quality housing in big cities for key workers in social care and health services. Locally available, high quality, affordable childcare, together with fully paid parental leave for similar amounts of time across Europe, and the right of parents to be supported when their children are ill are also obvious candidates. Such policies are however ineffective if they are not fully accepted by management and integrated into workplace practices.

It is possible that there has been too much of a focus in research and the public discourse on policy with a consequent neglect of such factors as intergenerational support, precisely because it is not possible to legislate for it. However, alternative strategies are also needed, for example, targeting resources at those with few kin or those located far from their own families, or finding innovative strategies of support.

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