

Transitions

WELL-BEING REPORT Executive Summary

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

Research Report #10

[Http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions](http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions)



Transitions

Well-Being Report

Nevenka Černigoj Sadar and Polona Kersnik

With contributions from the other members of the **Transitions** team
Sue Lewis, Janet Smithson, John Haworth and Christina Purcell
Manchester Metropolitan University

And

Julia Brannen and Michaela Brockmann

Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London

Ann Nilsen, Sevil Sumer and Lise Granlund

University of Bergen

Margareta Bäck-Wiklund and Lars Plantin

University of Goteborg

Nevenka Černigoj Sadar and Polona Kersnik

University of Ljubljana

Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes, Laura den Dulk and Bram Peper

Utrecht University

Siyka Kovacheva, and Neli Demireva

Paissii Hilendarski State University

Jeanne Fagnani and Geneviève Houriet-Ségar

MATISSE, University of Paris 1-CNRS

Maria das Dores Guerreiro, Pedro Abrantes and Inês Pereira

CIES/ISCTE

January 2006

Published by: RIHSC: the Research Institute for Health and Social Change (formerly COP Research Group)

Copyright (c) 2006 RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced by any means, or transmitted, or translated into a machine language without the written permission of the RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change, unless under the terms of the Copyright Licensing Agreement, or for use in Education, or for dissemination within an organisation in which case the work must be reproduced in its entirety with acknowledgement of the COP Research Group as its source.

RIHSC Research Reports and Occasional Papers

Published occasionally by the RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change

For information contact the publishers at the address below

ISSN 1359-9089

ISBN 1-900139-03-0

Printed by the Manchester Metropolitan University

RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change:

RIHSC is a centre of international excellence and innovation in critical research and consultancy on social change, social inclusion, community participation, well-being, work and leisure, health and social care practices and policies, and the clinical biomedical, behavioural and forensic sciences.

RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change
Manchester Metropolitan University
Elizabeth Gaskell Campus
Hathersage Road
Manchester
M13 0JA
Tel: 0161 247 2563/2556/2595
Fax: 0161 247 6364
Email: C.Kagan@mmu.ac.uk or S.Lewis@mmu.ac.uk

Transitions is a research project funded within the Key Action Improving the Socio-economic Knowledge Base, of the Fifth Framework Programme of the European Union.

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 of the Well-being Report

This report explores the notion of well-being in relation to the transition to working parenthood for new mothers and fathers employed in private and public sector organisations within seven European states: Bulgaria, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK. The different social policy, historical, ideological and economic contexts in these countries constitute a range of different situations in which working parents combine employment and family life. (See Table 1 below, Section 1.1 "National contexts, review of relevant literature on well-being, and development of a conceptual framework")

The state of the art literature review for this project (see Section 1.2, Review of the well-being literature in the different national contexts and development of a conceptual framework) demonstrates that current research on well-being is approached from very different perspectives, through a host of different concepts, sometimes overlapping and sometimes quite distinct. The focus varies from research on living conditions, poverty and social exclusion/inclusion to studies on stress, quality of life, and a variety of feelings or emotions, such as happiness, joy and flow. The term well-being is often used interchangeably with the term quality of life.

The concept of well-being is used increasingly frequently in some countries (especially the UK and other English speaking countries). It is emerging in research and national debates in the Netherlands and Sweden, but is rarely or never used in other countries (Bulgaria, Slovenia or France). The term is difficult to translate in a simple way in Norway.

Well-being in relation to work, or work-family issues, is usually conceptualised at an individual level. Much less attention has been paid to the notion of well-being at more collective levels, such as the level of the organisation. This project aimed to extend the notion of well-being, and especially positive well-being, to organisational contexts, focusing on collective interpretations of well-being.

The development of a framework for studying the concept of well-being, both individual and collective, in diverse contexts, is thus particularly challenging.

A Framework for exploring well-being of parents of young children and organisational well-being, in the context of changing workplaces

Conceptual foundations

In conceptualising well-being in this project several dominant approaches were considered, drawing on the literature and research traditions in several countries and disciplines. The approaches which most explicitly informed the project's conceptualisation of well-being, at the individual and organisational levels, include:

at the individual level:

- Positive Psychology, including sources of positive well-being, in addition to causes of stress.
- Scandinavian sociology, including Allardt's model of Having, Loving, Being.

at the organisational level:

- Ethics of care, including co-operative relationships, shared responsibilities and obligations.
- Organisational culture, including support, mutual trust, group morale, and shared values.
- Concepts of healthy organisations and organisational well-being, including individual well-being within organisations and socially sustainable work.

Overall approach

In the project, well-being in the transition to parenthood is explored in the context of:

- national social and economic policy
- organisational change at the workplace level
- individual and family resources and supports

This framework for the study permits the exploration of inter-relationships between the different levels of context on well-being.

The study also explores multiple, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives on well-being at the organisational and family levels; including those of:

- employers/ managers
- employees/parents
- parents / spouses

Well-being is explored first in relation to organisational context and change and then developments in individual well-being during the transition to parenthood are explored within socio-historical and biographical framework.

Multiple methods

In order to examine the impact of organisational context and change on well-being eleven organisational case studies were developed in public and private sector organisations in seven countries. The specific, multiple methods employed to explore well-being in the case studies included: questionnaires, document analysis and manager interviews (to explore organisational context), and focus groups with parents. Biographical interviews were carried out at a later stage with selected focus groups participants, and where possible their partners, to locate the well-being of employed parents of young children within a life course perspective within the diverse contexts.

Key Findings and Conclusions

Questionnaire results: some preliminary findings

The results of the **questionnaire** which assessed well-being in work, family, and life in general indicate that the **most significant sources of individual well-being are in family life** for the respondents at this phase in the life-course in all the countries studied in this project. Being a mother or a father contributed most to the positive experiences of well-being. However, this can be undermined by material circumstances.

Work is also an important source of well-being, and is particularly so in the Scandinavian countries, which might relate to supportive social policy and its implementation in workplaces. Parents report feeling least positive about their experiences of work in Bulgaria (where public policy is supportive for parents, but is not always implemented at workplace level or is undermined by job insecurity) and also in the Netherlands, where the family appears to be a much stronger source of well-being.

There was greater variation between the countries regarding general well-being compared to well-being at work and family well-being. This appears to relate partly to economic and material conditions.

The qualitative stages of the research helped to flesh out and understand some of the questionnaire findings and provide a more in-depth, nuanced insight in the experiences of working parents in different national and workplace contexts.

The Organisational case studies: issues in conceptualising organisational well-being

The study showed that it is important to conceptualise organisational well-being in context specific ways. What makes a 'healthy' organisation in one sector or one country may be very different in another context. The particular form of organisational change taking place and the ways in which this is managed, influences **needs** and **expectations** and hence **feelings about the organisation**. However, there is a question of whose perspective to take on needs as the perspectives of managers and subordinates often diverge. Participants' evaluations of the organisation in meeting their needs are influenced by their values, subjective and cultural expectations and sense of entitlement to organisational support. Expectations and evaluations of well being in an organisation are also affected by processes of social comparisons. Parents compare their situations with social referents within and beyond their organisation. Different employees have different needs. In particular, parents often need very different organisational supports than non-parents. Needs can also change over time.

The conceptualisation of organisational well-being remains problematic, not least because of the difficulties in disentangling the notion of organisational as distinct from, and at times opposed to, individual well-being, as well as distinct from national, social, political and economic context. There are also issues about defining organisational well-being since well-being tends to be associated with departments or units more than the "organisation". It may be more useful to conceptualise well-being in organisations, which permits multiple perspectives at different organisational levels.

Common factors contributing to well-being in organisations

Notwithstanding these critiques, it is possible to identify some common factors described by parents in the study as contributing to well-being in organisations (as opposed to the more problematic concept of organisational well-being) in both private and public sectors. These include: permanent or relatively secure work contracts and flexible working time and leave policies that are well implemented and respected. In describing organisational cultures various discourses emerged. However the common base is that management support and understanding and colleague support and solidarity are considered crucial for well-being. Good salaries and challenging work are mainly mentioned as important factors influencing well-being in the private sector. In the public sector the prevailing factors are trust, autonomy, cooperativeness and the absence of after hours work. Caring organisations tend to be conceptualised differently in the public and private sectors. The ethic of care is more likely to be regarded as conflicting with the ethic of business in the private sector, although this is also emerging in the public sector with modernisation.

Barriers to well-being in organisations

In general more factors limiting well-being are mentioned in private sector compared to the public sector organisations. Most often mentioned are: increase of temporary work contracts, organisational climate that prioritises efficiency, competitiveness and task orientation over people, and poor or inefficient communications. However, those in private sector employment are usually better paid than their public sector counterparts, who can positively affect aspects of well-being in terms of housing choices, childcare and transport options.

There are some common barriers to positive well-being mentioned in both sectors. These are: the changing nature of work in terms of intensification, overload and changing work demands, growing actual and/or expected job insecurity, inflexible working practices and managerial discretion/insensitivity, all of which undermine the social sustainability of work. Even if an ethic of care, gender equity or a dual agenda rhetoric of effectiveness though supporting employees is incorporated into organisational practice, many problems still remain. Pervasive current organisational trends, such as the intensification of work, perpetuate a male model of work, and undermine the equitable reconciliation of paid work and parenting.

Well-being, time and the life-course

A biographical interview guide was developed for exploring well-being in relation to various dimensions of parents' lives, taking a temporal aspect of narrative into account. The interviews demonstrated that well-being is not a static state, but a multi-faceted process situated in time and dependent upon the different layers of context in which life is embedded. The biographical interviews demonstrate the importance of exploring well-being across everyday and life-course time and within many layers of context. Context influences perceptions, which influences expectations, which in turn influence judgement/appraisal and feelings of well-being that can fluctuate even over a typical day. It is also clear from the interviews that positive and negative well-being are not mutually exclusive. The interviews illustrate ways in which work-family boundary strategies and options for young parents are related to the different layers of context within which they live their lives and that well-being for new parents remains a gendered experience, albeit operating in complex and diverse ways across contexts.

In addition, both context and life-course phase are significant in relation to perspectives of having, loving and being as aspects of well being. For example, many mothers are happy to have and love and leave personal 'being' until a later life phase, or achieve 'being' through loving (parenthood) or through having meaningful but not necessarily well remunerated work. However, economic context matters although parents in less affluent contexts find different ways of coping, have lower expectations and do not necessarily have a poor sense of well being. Other values also matter. For example, some mothers were prepared to spend more time in paid work than they considered ideal from a family perspective, in order to provide more material benefits for their children.

Well-being and work-family relations

Work-family relations were explored in relation to opportunities for flexibility in managing work-family boundaries provided by organisations and later in relation to the individual and household strategies parents use to combine work and family life. Part time work and flexible working schedules/hours options were most often offered in Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and partly also in the UK. These options are quite new in Portugal, Slovenia and Bulgaria. In particular, options for part time work were more often constrained by parents' financial situation and rigid management in the latter countries, compared to organisations in Scandinavia and Netherlands. However, the impact of opportunities for part time or flexible work can be double edged. They can contribute to positive well being in the short term, helping parents, to manage work-family boundaries at the individual and household level. However part time work tends to limit career opportunities. Moreover, part time work in the context of efficiency drives result in colleagues having to take on extra work. This can result in lowered morale and/or feelings of guilt among part time workers. Flexible working can increase the permeability of work-family boundaries, but in the context of intensified workloads can result in work intruding on family time and lead to overwork. The impact of policies on parents' experiences of well being is therefore complex.

In the biographical interviews strategies were discussed for managing the following boundaries:

- a) psychological, i.e., cognitive and emotional;
- b) spatial;
- c) temporal.

In coping with transitions from work to family and vice versa parents use various individual strategies taking into account public policy and organisational options. The setting of boundaries is the process of learning influenced by the stage of life cycle, gender and life priorities. The work-family strategies that parents described varied from complete segregation to integration. The permeability of work-family boundaries is more problematic for mothers than for fathers in our study, as, generally, the mothers not only

carried out only more of the informal family work but were also, typically but not always, more emotionally engaged. In this study, fathers were more likely to separate the world of paid work and family life. Neither integration nor segregation work-family strategies were found to automatically lead to greater or lower levels of reported well-being in a simple way. More important for well-being appeared to be whether a parent has a choice and some control over temporal and spatial flexibility. Being able to successfully achieve the preferred strategy tended to be associated with more positive well being.

Well-being and policy-making

Policies addressing diverse objectives, for example, gender equality and the reconciliation of employment and family life, health, fertility issues and citizenship, as well as socially sustainable work and corporate social responsibility, ultimately address well-being, implicitly or explicitly. Could a more explicit focus on well being in policy making contribute to these objectives and if so, how? In this respect this study raises as many questions as it answers. We have argued that well-being is complex, multi-faceted, fluctuating over time and influenced by the many layers of context in which individual's lives are embedded. There can therefore be no simple answers to questions about how policy can enhance well being for working parents. There are no quick fixes. However, there are a number of issues arising from this study that are relevant for policy makers to consider.

1. At the most basic level of being able to work and care, or "have " and "love" in Allard's model some policies and supports that are crucial for the well being of most working parents, for example some form of childcare. Our study points to the importance of identifying the most vulnerable parents, who are most likely to need support in achieving positive well-being. Policies that would help such parents include not only childcare but also, for example, affordable, good quality housing in big cities especially for key workers in social care and health services. The availability of 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 crucial, although such policies are ineffective if they are not fully accepted by management and integrated into workplace practices. Gaps between policy (national and/or workplace) and practice were evident in all the case study organisations. Parents' experiences of well-being in organisations depends on fundamental requirements in terms of not just policies, but also culture and practice and especially the day to day support of line managers.

2. Beyond meeting basic needs, a focus on multiple layers of context as well as dimensions of time point to the need for a multi-layered approach to policy- making to enhance well being. Different layers of context are important for enhancing parents' well-being. For example, we have seen that changes in legislation alone are of limited value for enhancing well-being of new parents without shifts in organisational, family and community values and practices. Policy making to address well-being would therefore need to be integrated and collaborative at many levels. For example, different areas of public policy such as educational, health, work and employment and fiscal policies need to be integrated and to be supported on different societal levels.

3. A frequently recurring theme across the countries is the ways in which gender shapes experiences of parenthood and well being, albeit in complex ways 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 and therefore a crucial focus for policy making at different levels to address the well-being of parents. However, while the transition to parenthood affects both mothers and fathers, the different experiences and starting points of mothers and fathers, which also vary across national contexts, still needs to be acknowledged.

4. There are significant questions to be considered about whose well-being is to be addressed, at what point of time, in what context. A life course approach would involve

focusing on the potential long term as well as short term impact of policies and practices on well-being in given contexts. For example, there is a dilemma that policies that meet parents' currently articulated needs – for example part-time work for mothers, can enhance mothers well-being in the short term but also reproduce gender inequalities and potentially undermine well-being in the long term, unless change occurs in workplace values and practices such as the gendered construction of organisational commitment in terms of full time work. This again points to the need for interrelated changes at many levels.

5. Policies that aim to bring about fundamental social changes towards what is considered to be a common good, may also affect well-being negatively for some people in the short term, albeit aiming for long term positive consequences. For example, our study demonstrates that policies that address gender issues, such as the father's quota in parental leave in Norway and Sweden may create short term tensions in some families, but such couple tensions may be necessary for progress to occur and in the interest of long term well-being in families and societies. Similarly this study shows that rather low expectations of organisational support for managing work and family life may be more easily met in less affluent societies especially where gender equality ideology is not yet widely established. On the other hand the resistance to organisational change to enhance parents' well-being in less affluent societies could be greater. Low expectations may more easily generate well-being, in contrast to the higher expectations of support among 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, with the potential to contribute to enhanced well-being- in terms of longer term opportunities for positive experiences in work and family, and for having, loving and being.

6. The dynamic of change have to take into account the contextual and historical options because the drastic changes even with the aim to create positive social changes could create resistance and seriously delay the positive effects.

Overall this project indicates that rapidly changing conditions in European workplaces in the global market require the ongoing evaluation of the impact of a range of policies and practices on the well-being of individual parents and their employing organisations, taking both short term and long term perspectives, and taking into account of the roles of the most relevant actors: state, employers, trade unions and workers.

ISBN 1-900139-03-0

£2.50