Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace: young adults negotiating the work–family boundary (TRANSITIONS)

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Key search terms:

Disciplines: demography, gender studies, organisational psychology, social policy, sociology.

Topics / themes: economy (organisational change); health (well-being); policy (employer policies; public / private sector); socio-demographic processes (demographic trends, family support, family–employment reconciliation); working life (working parents);

Units of comparison: administration (organisations); demographic units (families, fathers, gender, generations, households, life course, mothers, socio-economic groups); employment (public / private sector); political institutions (policy actors); social protection systems; spatial units (countries, EU member states).

Concepts: socio-demographic processes (family practices, formal and informal support, intergenerational solidarity, life course, negotiation, parenthood, time, transition to parenthood); values (well-being); work (workplace change, work–family boundaries).

Funding: European Commission Framework Programme 5.

Methodological approaches: case studies (embedded case study); comparative method; documentary searches (literature reviews); mixed methods; qualitative approaches (biographical interviews, focus groups, in-depth interviews, policy analysis, secondary analysis).

Methodological issues: case selection, comparability, contextualisation, generalisation, rigour, transparency.

Research context

Transitions was a multinational team research project, undertaken between 2002 and 2005 with funding from the European Commission's Fifth Framework Programme (FP5), and coordinated from Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. The research proposal was developed from an earlier study conducted by some members of the consortium for DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (see Brannen et al., 2002). The FP funding enabled an expanded interdisciplinary team to conduct new empirical work across eight EU member states including two East European countries concerning parenthood and employment.

Research topic / theme

The research topic concerned the experience of the transition to parenthood and being a working parent in the context of employment trends and different national welfare state regimes. The broad societal context was the falling fertility rates, considerable uncertainty and change, especially in the workplace and family life, and the reduction in welfare expenditure in many European countries. In 2000, the European Commission's remit under the Union's treaties included the monitoring of demographic trends, a theme which continues to be of broad topical interest, and also the theme of 'societal and individual well-being: societal trends, the implications of structural changes and technological development'. The flexibilisation of working patterns and the intensification of work brought on by organisational change were also aspects that the project sought to address since they have potential to blur the boundaries between employment and family life for parents and to create pressure on family lives.

Aims, objectives and research questions

The earlier study conducted by some of the partners of young people's orientations to work and family life in the future (Brannen et al., 2002) suggested that, for some working parents, the changing insecurities and pace of change in employment were likely to make childcare and child rearing increasingly difficult. In this study the overall objective was to examine how young European men and women working in public and private sector workplaces negotiate motherhood and fatherhood, and work–family boundaries in the context of different national welfare state regimes, family and employer support. Specific aims and research questions were;

1. To map national contexts through public policies for parents, demographic trends, discourses concerning the reconciliation of employment and family life in the countries in which it was proposed to carry out the study.

   How do the demographic profiles differ with respect to motherhood and fatherhood in the participating countries? What public policies existed for working parents in the countries and to what extent were they mainstreamed?

2. To understand the impact of organisational context and organisational change on those who become parents.

How does the organisational context shape the experience of working parents, for example globalisation, technological developments, increased economic competition and the demand for greater efficiency? How do these experiences differ across public and private sector organisations in each country?

3. To examine the transition to parenthood in the context of the life course.

   How do working parents negotiate the transition to parenthood, the leave taken and the return to work? What resources do they draw upon in organisational and national policy and family contexts and do they affect the experience of being a working parent? How do these sources of support interact?

4. To understand how parents negotiate work–family boundaries.

   How do they negotiate parenthood in the context of the changing nature of employment, and the blurring of work–family boundaries associated with advances in information and communication technology? What strategies do they develop? How do they negotiate their identities as parents and workers?

5. To deconstruct the notion of positive well-being during parenthood.

   What is positive well-being in relation to parenthood and how can it be studied? How is well-being generated at individual, family and workplace levels and what factors militate against well-being?

6. To examine the policy implications of the study.

   How can working parents be better supported and how can their well-being be enhanced? How do public polices and employer policies in different countries, including employment regulation**,** support, complement, substitute for, or work against one another? How do they shape work–family strategies and contribute to well-being?

7. To disseminate the research findings to a wide audience of policymakers, employers and other stakeholders via a website, interim reports, working papers, a final report and conference presentations.

Resources and governance

The Transitions team had an advantage that several of the partners and the UK coordinator had worked together before on EU research, although not under the Framework funding (see above). The specification regarding management involved a dedicated workpackage. The coordinator was also supported by a scientific coordinator who oversaw the development of the research design and methodology. The two UK universities involved in coordination and scientific management were supported by the Brussels Office, and by considerable expertise to assist with the application. The process was nonetheless extremely time consuming for those closely involved in the proposal development, which included a partner from another country.

Transitions was awarded 1.3 million euros for 36 months which ran from January 2003 to the December 2005. The budget covered the appointment at Manchester Metropolitan University of a full-time research fellow for the duration of the project, part-time secretarial and administrative assistance, and travel and subsistence expenses for the coordinating team. The full-time research fellow who worked with the coordinating team had previously been employed in a similar role in the earlier EU study, and thereby contributed to a growing body of expertise in cross-national research, ensured continuity of personnel, and providing the person concerned with career development.

The eight partners were full-time academic researchers. The research officers and research assistants in the partner countries, several of whom were postgraduate research students, were contracted for agreed periods of time to carry out the project work in the participating countries. In one Scandinavian country, matched funding was provided by the partner university, which considerably increased their research capacity over the whole course of the study. In another Scandinavian country, the project benefited from a parallel project which covered similar issues.

The number and geographical spread of participating countries (see below under research design) met the Commission's criteria. The European team included a disciplinary mix of sociologists, psychologists, organisational psychologists, a demographer and social policy researchers. The project was complex and required a range of methodological and professional skills and competences, including large-scale survey data analysis, policy and documentary analysis, conduct of focus groups and qualitative in-depth interviewing in organisations, and biographical methods.

The European Commission's standard contractual arrangements applied and annual reporting.

Management and coordination

The project was managed and coordinated by the team at Manchester Metropolitan University and supported in another UK university by a scientific coordinator who oversaw the development of the design and methodology. Project meetings were held twice yearly – six in total. Each partner country team hosted a project meeting (around 30 people) with the whole team meeting in six of the eight countries. The research fellow at Manchester Metropolitan organised the agendas while the local teams organised the venues and the hotels. The research fellow took responsibility for the minutes of the meetings, which were circulated to all partners. Team members were also able to organise additional meetings during academic conferences, which were crucial for sustaining ongoing discussions. Face-to-face contact was nevertheless limited and the role of email and telephone communication was clearly vital to the project.

Responsibility for all the nine work packages was divided among the teams with partners taking responsibility for the consolidated report for the relevant work package. The research fellow ensured that schedules and documentation were distributed by email, and monitored the deliverables. The coordinating team processed the national reports in consultation with the relevant partners and research officers / assistants, and undertook more editing work than was planned. The primary data collected in each country were retained by the teams in their own languages. The research instruments were discussed at the meetings and revised via email. Workshops in which extracts of data were exchanged for cross-national discussion were facilitated. Attention was given to research training in particular in biographical research methods and in analysis of individual case studies. The scientific coordinator visited one of the participating countries alone to assist in methodological development, a visit which afforded insights into the research environment and local context.

No funds were sought for translation. All the partners and / or their researchers were able to converse competently in English, while their written English language skills varied. Meetings were conducted in English. National and consolidated workpackage reports were written in English with assistance from the coordinating team. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in the language of the relevant country, and analytical frameworks were developed by the scientific coordinator to facilitate comparative analysis.

The workpackage reports mirrored the phases of the research. One partner took responsibility for secondary analysis and collation of statistical and official statistics pertaining to demographic trends relating to the eight countries, and wrote the comparative report. A second partner took responsibility for collating and integrating the literature reviews, which each country team carried out. A third partner took responsibility for coordinating material from each of the countries on public discourses on parenthood and working life. A fourth partner integrated the national reports of the organisational case studies. A fifth partner took overall responsibility for research methodology. A sixth partner took responsibility for producing a report of the biographical interview studies carried out with working parents in each country. A seventh partner took responsibility for overseeing dissemination plans and their delivery. The well-being work package was continued throughout the project and built into all the phases of the study; the material was drawn together in a report by an eighth partner. The coordinating team in Manchester took responsibility for the final report as well as the coordination of the project.

Professional and ethical standards

The fact that a core group had a prior existence was important in securing the funding and in ensuring a coherent approach and high standards but it also led to difficulties in incorporating new members, especially within such a large group. While the team adopted a commitment to working in non-hierarchical ways, and to encouraging the careers of the younger or less established researchers, it was sometimes hard to reconcile egalitarian ideals with working practices. A second issue related to the diversity in the disciplinary backgrounds and methodological expertise across the team, especially in some methods. How far this explained the unevenness in the reporting of the data analysis is difficult to assess however, given this issue was often confounded by competence in written English. A third issue relates to ethical issues and can affect standards is authorship. Published papers were in authors' own names, with an acknowledgement of the partners' contribution to the whole project. While ground rules about authorship were formulated in Transitions, including the involvement of early career researchers where possible in writing, these did not address the fact that some researchers left the project before its end or were unable to find unpaid time to contribute to the writing. A further ethical issue concerned the formula for distributing the budget across the countries. This effectively meant that poorer countries were disadvantaged, for example in travel costs, which was a potential source of discomfort within the team.

Rationale for the research design

Transitions adopted an embedded case study design (Yin 2003) in which working parents were studied with reference to three analytic but conceptually interrelated levels: the macro level of national public policy provision; the organisational level of employer policies, cultures and practices and informal support in the workplace; and the individual biographical level of the trajectories and experiences of working parents. Concerning the choice of countries, the project sought a spatial distribution within the boundaries of the EU's funding prerequisites at the time.

Within these limitations the countries were selected according to type of welfare regime: two Nordic countries with egalitarian welfare states (Sweden and Norway); two liberal welfare states (the UK and The Netherlands), in addition to Portugal, which has a familialistic welfare system, and Bulgaria and Slovenia (Eastern Europe), whose welfare states do not fall into the categories described by Esping-Andersen (1990). The organisations were selected on the basis of principles of similarity and difference. Given that sectoral type affects working parents' experiences, they represented both private and public sectors in each country: social services in the 'human services' public sector, and finance organisations in the 'for profit' private sector. Up to 10 managers from different levels of each organisation were interviewed and documentary information was collected about the organisations. Mothers and fathers with a youngest child under 12 years old took part in workplace-based focus groups (between 4 and 11 focus groups per organisation). Participants were recruited for the biographical interviews from these groups. In the selection of biographical cases, we aimed to conduct at least 10 interviews with parents from each workplace. We sought to compare cases of working mothers and fathers who had children under 12 in similar occupational statuses within similar organisations.

Rationale for the research methods

The choice of research methods was driven by the multi-layered research design (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011). Each level was matched by a particular method or set of methods which together constitute a multi-method approach. To address the macro level, secondary analysis of existing national survey data was carried out, and documentary data analysis of public discourses and identification of public policies for working parents. To address the workplace or organisational level, we chose interviews with managers (at different levels of the organisations), focus groups with parents conducted in the workplace, and documentary analysis of workplace policies and statistics. At the level of the individual parent, we employed biographical methods and carried out lifelines with parents to examine their experiences over the life course. Lifelines that involved graphical depictions of the life course of parents proved helpful in an international team for comparing the institutional contexts (for example educational systems) across countries, which influenced the timing of the transition to parenthood and the contexts in which people became parents. Several types of data were collected: official statistics, documentation from organisations, interviews with managers and focus groups with parents in the workplace, questionnaires and biographical interviews with parents, and lifelines.

Conceptual issues

A key conceptual issue lay in the terms according to which the Commission framed the call for proposals. Transitions sought to include itself under the broad rubric of well-being, a term that was not uniformly meaningful or acceptable across the team, especially by those from particular disciplines and countries. While this was discussed at some length, operationalising the concept was not easily resolved. At meso and macro levels, significant discourses in workplaces and countries were analysed, for example concepts of work–life balance and income inequalities. In terms of measuring individual well-being, a short questionnaire was administered to research participants in the workplace. Much of the conceptual work was carried out at the proposal writing phase and would have warranted revisiting in the project meetings. However, given that resources only allowed for two meetings a year and that the project had to complete the literature reviews in the first 3–4 months, the time available was insufficient.

Data collection and analysis

Because of problems of harmonising international data, at the macro level of analysis, it proved difficult to compare all the countries on some variables.

At the organisational level, gaining access to the types of workplace selected was not uniformly successful, with one country unable to gain access to a finance company or bank. In addition, gaining access to organisations is a multi-phased process, and typically involved negotiations at several tiers of management, especially in the public sector, which was time consuming. Other problems included gatekeepers acting as barriers, exercising bias as to which participants they referred us. It was also necessary to contend with the degree of interest and / or threat generated by the research topic in some countries and organisations. Other challenges that had to be overcome included lack of access to or availability of organisational databases; finding parents who met the criteria; time pressures in the workplace; having to do focus groups across a wide range of geographical and organisational locations; a perceived lack of relevance to participants; an over representation of core employees and the neglect of peripheral workers where services were contracted out; a lack of representation of minority ethnic groups.

One of the greatest challenges, especially in this project, was for those who were less familiar with case histories and biographical interview approaches. To anticipate the difficulties, time was allocated to the discussion of interview guides and transcripts. Test biographical interviews between team members were conducted at one meeting, and a training session was organised.

Comparative analysis is at the heart of cross-national studies. To assist this process, analysis schedules were provided to organise the data analysis and to assist in structuring the reporting of results from national studies for each phase, for example in the reports of national case studies conducted in public and private sector organisations. Quotations from the interviews and focus groups carried out in the organisations were required to be translated into English. In the phase where biographical interviews were conducted with individual parents, extensive summaries of interviews were written in English, and relevant interview extracts were translated. The interview summaries and national reports were made available to all team members as they were written. At the end of the project they were put onto DVDs.

In the analysis of the biographical interviews with parents, we sought to match cases across countries. However it was necessary to work within the limitations of what was comparable. For example, although we sought to include a majority of partnered interviewees, we also wanted some lone parents. This proved difficult in some contexts. In addition, we found few parents in manual low skilled jobs in some contexts because of outsourcing. Furthermore, the qualifications demanded in social services differed between countries.

In working with biographical material (the interview study) even where we identified comparable cases, the depth and length of these summaries vary greatly between countries, again relating to fluency in written English but also raising questions about the depth and quality of the data. One of the ways round this was to feed back the case analysis to the relevant country team for confirmation of interpretations and to gain additional interview data that had not been translated, and contextual data in which to situate the case. However, this was no substitute for the translation of the original interview transcripts.

Interpretation and dissemination of findings

As already noted, issue of cross-national checking of validity were problematic where material was not translated. However, the project dealt with issues of generalisability through attention to care and rigour in sampling and in justification of cases chosen at different levels of context (macro, meso and micro) (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011). The multi-layered approach that was adopted makes visible what may be glossed over or be less evident when only one layer of context is taken into account, as in the case of cross-national surveys. A study that covers individual experiences provides for nuances concerning variations in individual experience, the meaning that people give to their lives and how their agency is shaped in and by different layers of context. The Transitions study was able to tease out how, for particular persons under particular conditions, resources at different levels such as public policy, employer practices and informal kinship support, intersect and impact on working parents' lives. Moreover, since only some relevant contextual features of individuals' situations emerged in informants' accounts, it was necessary to look out for them in the analysis (Nilsen and Brannen, 2002, Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). This is a benefit of a biographical approach and of a design that seeks to capture contextual levels. For example, parents did not always refer to public policy support or to the impact of their employment conditions. But since the study covered these issues in other phases of the research, we were able to bring these to bear in the individual case analysis.

The Transitions team has presented the project methods and findings at a wide variety of conferences, high profile seminars, and workshops in many countries. In addition to these seminars, the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods funded two workshops on Transitions' use of comparative methods; one related to organisational research, and another was on biographical methods. Under the grant, a third workshop was held for capacity building in comparative research to which the Transitions team contributed. A variety of presentations targeted policy makers and employers in different countries. Two edited books based on the comparative data have been produced from the project for publication by a commercial publisher (Lewis et al., 2009; Nilsen et al., 2012). Team members also participated in interviews, newspaper articles and radio discussions.

Lessons learned

Some lessons learned include the following:

- Invisible work is involved in working in international teams to ensure that the work is of a high standard. This work needs to be resourced, which involves a greater focus on inputs and process by building in more time for team building (smaller teams work better than larger teams), articulating and discussing sources of difference, framing diversity explicitly as a strength of cross-national research.
- Time for discussion and explication of concepts should be built into the project from the start; 'capacious concepts' need to be found that fit into and work across different contexts since these are likely to work best in comparative qualitative analysis.
- Although it is valuable to have the opportunity to learn new skills from experienced researchers, the danger is that this can polarise a research team into those who have more or less 'knowledge' or skills. Training resources and time need to be devoted to developing the knowledge and skills of less experienced researchers.
- Ideally, in cross-national studies that generate qualitative data, resources should be allocated to the translation of a selection of the interview transcripts into the common working language.
- Adjustments and compromises have to be made when working in cross-national teams. However it is not always possible to anticipate the necessary adjustments when planning a project and the timetable, while the conditions of the funding scheme may not allow for the necessary changes.
- Because much comparative analysis takes place after the end of a project, it is worth being careful about the selection of types of deliverables during the project.
- Deciding who the 'reader' is becomes more difficult in cross-national than national research and demands a wide range of dissemination strategies in different languages and to a range of audiences.
- Effort should be expended at the outset to resolve issues of ownership, authorship, archiving and English language domination.

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