Book Review/Compte rendu

Robert C. Ellickson, *The Household: Informal Order around the Hearth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 272 pp. $US 24.95 hardcover (978-0-691-13442-0)

In this book, Robert Ellickson, a professor of law, seeks to understand the household from the "bottom up rather than top down." By this he means he wants to move away from legal explanations for arrangements, which he argues most people do not use in household arrangements. In liberal societies, legal constraints for household formation are kept to a minimum and individuals develop their own arrangements. In this context, he explains how members of households work out arrangements through interaction.

While the front cover flap says that Ellickson's explanation draws on economic, legal, and sociological theory, economic explanations win out in the book. Ellickson concludes that who owns the home, how many people live together and the relationship between them, and how work and living arrangements are organized and managed are an outcome of reducing the transaction costs of household exchanges, or increasing the ease and efficiency of operations.

There is little sociology in the book. Evolutionary and philosophical arguments emerge at times and historical evidence is used to support arguments. The role of context and meaning, inequality and power, gender, age, and culture are notably absent or only very briefly discussed. The argument misses sociological work on institutions. In an effort to provide a counter to legal explanations, Ellickson's "bottom up" explanations focus on individual, rational behaviour at the expense of considering the wide array of nonlegal "top down" forces that shape interaction in households. For example, Ellickson defines norms on an individual level, discussing how individuals, couples, and households develop rules and norms for how to interact. He rarely considers norms as informal rules working along side the formal rules of law in constraining the options, interests, and desires of household members in organizing their living arrangements. Ellickson also overlooks taken-for-granted rules that guide our behaviours. At one point he writes, "the conventional kinship-based household persists not because individuals lack imagination … but rather because this traditional form has inherent advantages." New institutional arguments in sociology, however, show

how and why we do imitate common approaches rather than construct creative alternative arrangements, even in the face of inefficiencies.

Sociological explanations would enrich Ellickson's efforts to explain households. For example, he rightly argues that households are not the same as families, and research primarily focuses on families. In contrast, he applies the same transaction cost explanations to roommate, communal, and family households in a general theory of how households operate. But as he says, these are not all the same. Institutional explanations from sociology would show how laws, established norms, and taken-for-granted assumptions are different for married couples and families than they are for roommates. These constrain family households in ways that are different from other households. For example, married couples do not live together merely for the economies of scale cohabitation provides, but because this behaviour is an expectation for a given level of commitment in intimate relationships. Sharing a household is more than just an efficient arrangement. It is an institutionalized constraint within which couples operate. It has become a taken-for-granted assumption about how married couples live and if violated, couples face challenges to the validity of their relationship.

Furthermore, inequality based on age and gender is institutionalized as part of marital and family relationships, and therefore may play out differently in nonfamily households. This gets overlooked in Ellickson's general transaction costs theory of households. The following quote comes from a discussion of the influence of social norms:

> …widely honored customs can greatly influence the composition of co-occupant groups and also their homeways. In many societies, adult children are under social pressure to live with or near their aging parents. Ambient norms concerning gender roles, particularly if they have been internalized, are likely to strongly influence the allocation of co-occupants' tasks. By looking to customary gender roles for guidance about what gifts to make, co-occupants can reduce their transaction costs of coordination. Adherence to traditional gender roles was routine even at Woodstock-era communes nominally committed to gender equality. If widely embraced, however, ambient norms that pressure women into disproportionately performing certain domestic tasks may impair women's shares of household surplus (pp. 115-116).

Transaction costs are emphasized, references come primarily from law or economics, and the vast recent sociological work in this area is missing, leaving gaps in the argument.

Despite the lack of sociology, I found the book useful and have already cited it in my own sociological work. It is a valuable source for

reading across disciplines. By pulling together a range of diverse topics and data, the book is thought-provoking. It is dense but readable, and Ellickson presents economic arguments in an accessible way. Reading it challenged (and energized) me to think about the unique contribution of sociological explanations.

University of British Columbia Carrie Yodanis

Carrie Yodanis is an associate professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia. She studies gender and inequality in intimate relationships. She is currently writing a book about the institution of marriage today.
cyodanis@interchange.ubc.ca