

The Problems and Promises of Parenting in a Gendered World

Bonnie Fox, *When Couples Become Parents: The Creation of Gender in the Transition to Parenthood*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, 334 pp. \$35.00 paper (978-0-8020-9184-0), \$75.00 hardcover (978-0-8020-9183-3)

Gillian Ranson, *Against the Grain: Couples, Gender, and the Reframing of Parenting*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 214 pp. \$28.95 paper (978-1-4426-0358-5)

Babies create dramatic life changes for adults, arguably the most striking of the life course, and for sociologists, they create a theoretically rich arena in which to examine gender. The birth of a baby impels women and men to negotiate and renegotiate how to earn and care for the next generation, and as they do this, gender relations and inequalities come into sharp focus. Two recent books, *When Couples Become Parents: The Creation of Gender in the Transition to Parenthood*, by Bonnie Fox, and *Against the Grain: Couples, Gender, and the Reframing of Parenting*, by Gillian Ranson, take up important sociological questions intimately embedded in how rearing children affects adults' lives in a gendered society.

Fox beautifully captures the remarkable changes occurring in women's, and to a lesser extent, men's lives and relationships upon the birth of a baby. Throughout, she masterfully portrays respondents' stories of the emotional and practical transformation of life post-baby. Fox's theoretical starting point is Laslett and Brenner's work on social reproduction, which emphasizes the material conditions and social organization that are central to the (re)production of gender in the transition to parenthood. Fox develops ideas about the dynamics of social relations through the concept of the "economy of care," which involves physical and emotional care flowing between partners who have newly

become parents. Some of the questions she asks in the book include: why are gender divisions created when couples become parents, and how do those gender divisions affect relationships? What happens when a woman's flow of care to her partner suddenly changes directions to flow to a baby? Fox finds that some partnerships suffer and some thrive through this change. Most become less equitable. Fox elucidates critical insights about how social class resources operate to shape the networks and relationships of new parents. Social class is critical in a myriad of ways, but one important way is through support networks. A supportive social network helps to bolster marital relationships, but not necessarily equality in the division of labour between new mothers and fathers. Another way class was important occurred through occupational status, with both mothers' and fathers' positions in paid work important to how the couple negotiated labour in the home and how they felt about their first year of parenting. For example, mothers were strongly enabled in their negotiations over domestic work if they made more money than their husbands, and they also felt less overwhelmed by the privatized responsibility of caring for an infant if they had a position to return to in the labour market. Although many couples are able to sustain loving relationships even with the tensions surrounding housework or a time deficit, almost all couples, it turns out, under the heavy weight of social structures and cultural ideals that impel couples toward conventional parenting by gender, move toward inequality in the domestic division of labour even when they desired to act equitably.

Fox recruited a sample of couples from childbirth courses in diverse locations in Toronto, some that had relatively high fees like Lamaze, and others that were offered free of charge from the Public Health Department. About 1 in 5 couples who were asked took part in the study, for a total of 40 couples, including 9 working-class and 31 middle-class couples. Fox's decision to interview mothers and fathers before their child was born, and at several junctures during the first year of parenthood, is a tremendous strength of the study, showing the subtle changes in expectations, relationships, and practices across the beginning stage of parenting.

The early chapters capture the gripping stories of childbirth and the exhausting weeks of recovery and realignment after becoming parents. Fox reveals how critically important supportive social relationships are during this time and beyond. Supportive relationships allow women to experience childbirth with less medical intervention, or to interpret that intervention more benignly because it was chosen. She provides evidence that the feminist critique of medicalization of childbirth can be understood in a more nuanced way. The mothers had many different as-

assessments of what being in “control” meant for them, and both those with medical intervention and those without intervention felt positively about this rite of passage. At its core, what was most important to new mothers was having supportive people surrounding her as she gave birth, and knowing that she was going back into a supportive and equitable situation at home.

Chapters on negotiating the economy of care discuss baby care, housework, and the relationship between partners as they often struggle over their new world of parenthood and domestic work. In one incisive chapter, Fox fleshes out the varied forms, causes, and consequences of intensive mothering. Fox vividly shows the variations in intensive mothering among new mothers, which is sure to propel the literature forward in analyzing mothering as a practice. As Fox describes in a footnote, although the term intensive mothering is widely used, Hays (1996), who developed the idea, did not define it explicitly. Fox defines it as “a practice of prioritizing babies’ apparent needs and demands on a moment-by-moment basis, so that a woman’s time is literally devoted to the infant” (p. 302). As she points out, to some degree all mothers of infants are intensive mothers, given the tremendous amount of responsibility, management, and care that babies require. But still, there was variation in the levels of intensive mothering and how those experiences played out. At least three important findings related to intensive mothering will bear fruit for future studies. First, in some sense, only those who could “afford” to be (very) intensive mothers “chose” the most intensive level, i.e., those who were middle-class and homemakers. Another difference between the most intensive mothers and those less intensive were that the most intensive tended to let housework go, whereas less intensive mothers talked about accomplishing housework as a means of controlling their environment and as reasons for not attending to the baby every minute. Notably, less intensive mothers were still creating “home” and “family” through these other types of work. The most intensive mothers often were the most exhausted, suggesting the power of this ideology to negatively affect women’s emotional and physical health. Finally, the most intensive mothers brought men more into baby care by their intensity, i.e., those mothers who were most involved also had spouses who became very involved with baby care, perhaps due to the couples’ agreed upon definition of how much attention is “right” for babies. She shows how intensive mothering is full of contradictions, for example, it can bring fathers into care, but at the same time, make mothers more dependent on her partner in the economy of care, as she must “pay back” his flow of care to the infant.

Fox unearths the tensions surrounding the huge changes in time allocations that new parents experience, and the new division of domestic work that must be negotiated. Many women were angry with their husbands for their lack of contributions, but at the same time, because they felt more dependent on them, mothers often protected fathers' time. In this delicate economy of care, many things mattered. Among these, mothers' position in the labour force was very important in that it allowed her bargaining power in the division of labour if she had a relatively high salary and allowed her to feel less dependent and trapped if she had a position to return to. Fox's insights into the connections between fathers' success in the labour market and their involvement in domestic work are also fascinating and an important direction for future research. She describes how some working-class fathers' contingent work lives may have left masculine success in question and thus undermined confidence in crossing over to the more "feminine" baby care. Fox does a great job distinguishing between baby care and housework, because these are too often considered together in the literature, when in fact, a father's participation in baby care often "excused" him from housework in a mother's mind, as she sought to have him invest in what was viewed as a more important use of time — with the baby.

The negotiations affect the quality of marriage, and again, Fox points to the importance of social class in sustaining relationships. Fox shows four patterns among the partners: 1) a deteriorating relationship across the year, characteristic of 12 of the couples, including several of the working-class mothers and fathers; 2) stability but tension in the relationship; 3) stability but a strongly felt time famine, characteristic of those where both partners were working long hours; and 4) for six couples, strengthened relationships. The small number of couples whose relationships improved over the course of the first year of parenthood had one adult home all year with the baby, and often strong networks of support from friends and extended family, underscoring how social resources benefit the relationship. These parents also experienced a profound meaning from parenting together and a kind of transformation that enabled a deeper relationship between mother and father. More detail about couples' relationships prior to the baby being born would help to understand how commitments to equity may have affected negotiations over the economy of care once a baby was born.

In so many ways, then, the economy of care between a new mother and father cannot be understood without understanding how the couple is embedded in socioeconomic conditions. In all, Fox's work is rich and compelling, a landmark book for gender and family scholars and students. She underscores the myriad of critical ways in which social

class — through monetary, time, and status resources, as well as social supports — is a strong but subtle scaffolding surrounding the transition to parenthood and the relationships between new mothers and fathers. Fox has greatly advanced the literature on gender and parenting through *When Couples Become Parents*.

In *Against the Grain*, Gillian Ranson provides an insightful, succinct account of the world of families who are “earning and caring against the grain” in parenting their children. The “grain” is the structures and conventional understandings that keep gender as a primary force in making mothering and fathering separate and unequal practices. Ranson purposely sought out a sample of parents who were raising children unconventionally — pathbreakers who can help us learn much about gender and perhaps the future of family life. Notably, only a tiny percent of Fox’s new parents would be selected into this quite rare group. Whereas Fox’s book shows the powerful structures that normalize gender distinctions among new parents, Ranson purposely chose a sample of couples who were going “against the grain.”

With excellent detail provided on the difficult methodological challenge of sampling over four years, the reader is afforded an honest account of the decision-making process in choosing a theoretically sound set of mothers and fathers. Ranson’s inclusion of gay and lesbian couples is an important strength of the study, because these parents were going against conventional gender understandings in multiple ways that helped contextualize the sample as a whole. Ultimately, Ranson interviewed 32 couples whose children were from newborn to age 17, living in urban centres in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario, all of whom were equal partners in raising children.

The book begins by establishing the institutional and discursive context of family life in Canada in the 2000s. Ranson then provides two very important analytic groupings of the families. The first of these is based on the specific organization of work-family life among those parenting equally. The first category are “crossovers,” aptly named because fathers crossed over to homemaking while mothers were employed fulltime. Ranson included a lesbian couple in this category because it was the birth mother who was employed and the co-mother who stayed home. A second key category, perhaps ideologically somewhat different, were the “shift workers,” where both partners cared for the children some portion of the day, and did paid work, but arranged schedules so that one parent or the other could be with their children almost all of the time. Finally, the “dual dividers” had two partners who worked regular days and had help with child care, but who shared domestic work and child care once home. This latter group was distinct from the many dual earn-

ers in Canada not only by their equal sharing of both types of work, but by prioritizing the mothers' and fathers' jobs equally. The complex and multifaceted ways that couples come into their work-family arrangements underscores the diversity possibilities for creating against the grain parenting, but also the great amount of work that it takes for individuals and couples to figure out how to hold to a nonconventional model within a highly privatized and traditional system of care for children. The book mentions but could unearth more about the complex relationships that feed into and support the unconventional arrangements. Ranson says in the conclusion that fathers' early and deep involvement may be critical to equal involvement over the parenting life course, and her discussion of how this links to policy is quite important. More detail on the multitude of factors that led to changes across the years in these nonconventional families, such as second children being born, children entering institutionalized care, and changing work conditions and flexibility, would provide a great base for investigating the negotiations necessary to maintain equal parenting.

Ranson's second analytical choice is to separate parents whose children are preschoolers from those with school-aged and older children, a point at which, for at least some of the day and calendar year, the care of children is supported by the state through the education system. This comparison by the age of the children (19 with preschool children versus 13 with older children), is much welcomed and often neglected in research on gender and parenting.

The first chapters focus on the equal parenting of preschoolers. Ranson's description of the crossover parents was interesting for how mothers worked to maintain the emotional connections upon returning from work. Mothers saw themselves as prime comforters even when they were away most of the child's waking hours and tried to maintain their identity as mothers who are ultimately responsible for the family. Fathers in crossover families were not career driven, and happy to stay home, but they either maintained a small amount of paid work responsibilities from home, or thought about how they would do so in the future when their young children became somewhat older. Some struggled with the expectations of being the breadwinner even while loving their hands-on commitment to children. The dual-dividers and shift workers had a lot more work to juggle and negotiate with two jobs, and Ranson noted that almost all couples had one partner who was flexible enough to have work based at home a good part of the time.

A highly effective aspect of her division between those who are parenting the very young and those with school-aged children is that the "long view" of these unconventional families becomes more obvious,

with evidence that work, care, and roles change across partners over the parenting life course. This provides a fascinating glimpse into how the parents' roles in the family "set" over time or fluctuate. Ranson aptly describes some key challenges that have faced parents of older children along the way. These include fathers who have been out of the labour force for a long time in the crossover couples, and who now face vexing challenges upon reentering, much as homemaker mothers do once they have left to care for children. We also see mothers who perhaps initially resisted giving up ultimate responsibility for organizing care, but came to realize that it was beneficial to the children, themselves, and the relationship when that high level of parenting, the "executive responsibility," was shared. However, when one parent is sidelined as the other tries to maintain the executive responsibility and acts as a gatekeeper, rather than sharing the responsibility, emotions run high. Occasionally fathers were gatekeepers who kept power through holding on to the minutia of childrearing without sharing its richness with their wives; other times mothers were gatekeepers as they staunchly held steadfast to their culturally dictated primacy in the family. For most couples as they age, however, co-parenting holds promise: the flexibility they exhibit, the support they provide to each other, and perhaps the flexibility of their work lives have kept them stable and satisfied, proud of their arrangements and bonded together through their co-raising of children.

Ranson's main theoretical contribution is to show how the practices of these unusual couples surrounding earning and caring for children help to unravel and redefine the term "parenting." Typically, parenting is used as an allegedly gender-neutral term but ultimately hides the fact that it is mothers doing the work of and holding responsibility for children. Here, Ranson argues that the practices of men and women were "functionally interchangeable." The shared work defied easy categorization, because families did it in unique ways. But interchangeability meant that "practices usually associated with mothering or with fathering be considered separately from the person conventionally associated with their execution" (p. 178). This did not mean that parenting was genderless, as there were elements of everyday interactions with children that were certainly gendered, such as when mothers talked about how they bonded with daughters over "girl things." Nor did it mean that personalities did not matter, but parents were, or became, interchangeable in that mothering and fathering became meaningless and degendered terms. How parents parented is in some important part based on their personality, children's changing allegiances, the child's gender, and so on, but on the whole, Ranson could not point to any one type of care that was recognizable as "mothering" versus "fathering" — only "parenting."

For the most part, but not always, parents recognized and embraced their engagement in this redefined kind of parenting, but knowing why some did and some did not would strengthen the study. It would be worthwhile to compare these “truly” equal to the few who remained in relationships where the mother or occasionally the father engaged in gatekeeping to retain “CEO at home” status. It was a struggle in some families to negotiate the delicate “dance” around mothers’ culturally sanctioned and upheld executive responsibility for children (whether the cultural ideology which says mothers should have responsibility no matter what, the fact that a mother had it when a father wanted it shared, or the fact that a father had it but had to pretend in certain ways that he did not). For example, one father tried *not* to exploit his advantage in knowing their son better than his wife, because although he was the primary parent most of the time, he recognized and respected the way his wife needed to feel that she was not displaced from her spot in the family. Another though, used his “CEO” power in the family to his advantage in trying to stay very close to his son.

Overall, the idea that these exceptional parents, chosen for their equality, are “parenting,” rather than mothering and fathering, because they are functionally interchangeable, is useful, though the nuances of the challenges parents face in their relationships and family work, and the wrestling with identities that sometimes contradicted their functional interchangeability is perhaps most fruitful for future research. Ranson succeeds in her goal to “map a phenomenon” in describing what “undoing gender” means in terms of everyday practices and more. In all, the book is fascinating reading on against the grain parenting, and both the description of challenges that the families face, and Ranson’s laying out of the promises of equal parenting are compelling.

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