Anthropology & Aging

Book Review

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Janet Holland and Rosalind Edwards have put together an excellent rich collection of essays about the state of familial relations in the United Kingdom. They, and various other authors, have focused on Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR), drawn from a series of continuing research efforts in different parts of England and Northern Ireland, especially the Timescape Project. This volume is part of a series issued by Palgrave MacMillan that examines changes in all aspects of family and personal life in the UK.

The research addresses changes in ages in mother and father roles and the changes in reciprocal roles of grandparents, parents, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. Each of the essays sets their findings in the context of political and economic changes going on in the UK, especially noting the ways in which government policy and social support institutions affect personal and familial choice. The authors embody their findings by presenting case studies/vignettes of their informants.

Sheena McGrellis and Janet Holland present a good example of how both economic and political factors affect one person's career and family prospects. "Maeve", a middle-class woman, left Northern Ireland with her long-term partner to further their prospects and then returned during hard times: "'It's just the way things are at the moment, isn't it, the recession...when we left, everything was fine, and when we came back this had all happened and we were like, what is going on, awful, all this bad news, left, right, and center" (2014, 58). It took them several months to adjust to the new conditions and readjust their lives.

Maeve and her partner were lucky because of their training and background. Lower class young men, especially ones who started families early, however, found their lives interrupted, postponed, and diverted by the Recession of 2008 and the Cameron Administration's austerity policies. Bren Neale and Carmen Lau Clayton present "Darren," aged 21, having to deal with new circumstances: "One grandmother in the sample offered to become the primary caregiver once the grandchild was born...'Oh my mum...she was like "if you can't look after him, I'll take him on as my own but he'll still be calling you mum and dad' [sic] and all this'" (2014, 76). Many young fathers in the studies were willing to "step up" to the new roles they had, including more housework, but they still relied to a great deal on their parents, and, often, on the new mother's parents to provide care giving and financial support.

Nevertheless, women continue to experience the most conflict and adjustment in terms of managing family and work roles. Rachel Thomson presents "Deborah," a middle-class woman as she adjusts to her pregnancy and new motherhood. As many women find, a woman, becoming pregnant, especially when

she is visibly so, changes a "gender-neutral" workplace into a gendered workplace: she is obviously a woman, a person who is becoming a mother, and will have to adjust, as will the workplace, to her new status and condition. She has to decide how much time to take off, how much time to work at some point after the child is born, and how to change her role vis-a-vis her mother. This latter point is a good example of her shifts: "Deborah's university education and career success created a gulf between mother and daughter. The arrival of a granddaughter has made this a little easier" (2014, 117). Thomson notes that Deborah's mother has been re-examining her own past to see that women could and can have greater independence juggling family and career.

As a consequence of their children's new parenthood, many grandparents now faced new demands. Many younger ones were willing to take on a greater role in their adult children's, grandchildren's, and great grandchildren's lives. This was especially true of lower class elders. But some people resented being put into this new role when they were "too young" themselves. Nick Emmel and Kahryn Hughes offer us the case of "Ruth": "Her experience of grandmothering, her feeling that she is the wrong age---expressed through the accounts of the way she feels some of her neighbours judge her and people in the street think about her—is, we suggest, the lack of harmony between societal symbol and her reality" (2014, 170)

At the same time, many children of parents experiencing challenges and changes find that they, too, have to adapt to the needs of their parents and grandparents. They play a greater role in housework and care giving. What is particularly interesting is that they have hopes for their parents' own development and see themselves as playing a constructive role in their lives as they all age. Rosalind Edwards, Susie Weller, and Sarah Baker present "Rooney," age 16: " ...[he] talked about his family sticking with and up for each other... (2014: 44.)" Edwards et al. see this family solidarity and set of expectations contrary to the media-prevalent narrative of intergenerational warfare and resentment of the upcoming generation often found in the UK and the US. They say that the resentment, in particular, is only experienced by a minority of people. "[I]nter-generational and intra-generational conflict and solidarity are far from the simplistic divisions that intergenerationalists would lead us to believe" (2014, 44).

The authors of the various articles and the editors intend that the case studies and their conclusions provide the basis for policy considerations and social service practice. Throughout the book, it is clear that economic policy affects family structure and disrupts adjustment patterns. It changes opportunities for all involved. Oftentimes agencies can and do adversely affect families, as when "Geoff" and "Margaret" got a "midnight drop" by social services of their three granddaughters because Mom was a "chronic heroin user." Nick Emmel and Kahryn Hughes note that there was no warning of the drop and no follow-up in terms of social supports (2014, 167;172.)

In their conclusions, Janet Holland and Rosalind Edwards argue that policy and future research should help the choices parents, grandparents, and growing children should make, not work against them. They further contend that qualitative research should continue to enhance this policy debate as well as understand from a larger perspective what changes families are experiencing (2014, 190-191.) Their conclusions and methodologies are also useful for students of family structure and policy in other countries.